


# COLLECTING

by Bohun Lynch

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These Diversions*

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# COLLECTING

## I

DE ROCHEFAUCAULT was once quoted by Richard Owen Cambridge in the *World*\* as having observed that "there are many people . . . who would never have been in love if they had never heard talk of it." The essayist, in a discussion which is to show how superfluities become necessities, proceeds, from this text, to demonstrate that "mankind pursue with much greater ardour, what they are talked into an admiration of, than what they are prompted to by their natural passions . . ."

Most collectors have been talked into an admiration of the various objects which it is their desire to possess.

Without accepting the explanation of collecting offered by some psycho-analysts (which is humiliating and far-fetched), we know that the impulse makes itself felt in us at the tenderest age at which we are exposed to crowd-influence, never later in fact, than when we go to school. It may begin with marbles or postage stamps or fossiled ammonites: for me

\* May, 1754

it was pen-nibs, a doubly curious beginning for one whom circumstance and inclination drive to much writing, which, however, and by choice, is done with a quill.

Now the essayist, having retold a story in the *Arabian Nights* continues: "The whole fashionable world are so many Parizades; and things not only useless in their natures, but also ugly in themselves, from having been once termed charming by some fashionable leaders of modern taste, are now become so necessary that nobody can do without them."

I rub my eyes and look again. Yes: I am not mistaken: 1754 is the year that is printed at the head of these remarks; 1754 not 1927. (One is prone to do a good deal of eye-rubbing in any scrutiny of the essayists of that period).

The practice of collecting curiosities and antiques is far older than almost any of those antiques now sought for, though to judge by the current literature and talk upon the subject, you would think that the habit began at the time of Edward VII's accession. But what another essayist called in this connexion "the involuntary convergence of general opinions" has certainly made this habit more

riotously popular during the last twenty years. Whereas through the 18th and 19th centuries (to keep to periods within our grasp) collectors were for the most part of the accumulative and repetitive sort, nowadays there are more people who "pursue with ardour" curious or ancient objects of a practical nature and to use them, when convenient, for their original purposes.

I don't know that it is necessary to defend accumulative collecting, provided that it is carried out with discretion and taste. Indeed, much is to be said for a cupboardful of beautiful things chosen each for itself rather than for its relationship to the rest or to the room which contains them. There can be seen in such wise accumulation something of the spirit of devoted uselessness which is so admirable a corrective in a material, go-getting age of push and hustle : it contains a spark of the same nature as that which vitalises amateur sport—a giving of something for nothing. I know several accumulative collections that, in a measure, I envy ; and I like to disassociate these from the sort of collections reprehended, for example, by Dr Johnson.

"To those who are accustomed to value

everything by its use,"\* he writes, "and have no such superfluity of time or money as may prompt them to unnatural wants or capricious emulations, nothing appears more improbable or extravagant than the love of curiosities, or that desire of accumulating trifles, which distinguishes many by whom no other distinction could have ever been obtained.

"He that has lived without knowing to what height desire may be raised by vanity, with what raptures baubles are snatched out of the hands of rival collectors, how the eagerness in one raises eagerness in another, and one worthless purchase makes a second necessary, may, by passing a few hours at an auction, learn more than can be shown by many volumes of maxims and essays. . . .

"The Collector . . . is soon overpowered by his habitual passion ; he is attracted by rarity, seduced by example and inflamed by competition. While . . . another, with more art than virtue, depreciates that which he values most, in hope to have it at an easy price. . . . The novice is often surprised to see what minute and unimportant discriminations increase or diminish value."

• *Idler*, May, 12, 1759

To-day a single misprint in a particular book will enhance its value from shillings to the corresponding number of guineas, and Johnson found inexplicable the fact that impressions of prints made before the plate was finished were often "inestimably valuable" : just as, on the other hand, a little modern carving upon the rail of an oak table—whether done by the amateur of the 'eighties who sought to adorn it, or by the more recent forger who aimed thereby to increase the price—will, by spoiling a genuine specimen for the advanced collector, greatly detract from its value.

As to the depreciation by a buyer of what he values most—can't you hear it? "No, sir. Its only a bread and butter piece : good of its kind, I grant you, but its not the best kind. Its not *important*. The feet are wrong. I've a couple like that at home now. Can't sell 'em. Shall have to *give* 'em away. Tell you what I'll do : if you'll accept my offer, I'll send the van round to fetch it."

Johnson's continued observations are as just now as they were when they were written. "Beauty is far from operating upon collectors as upon low and vulgar minds, even where beauty might be



thought the only quality that could deserve notice. . . .” He gives china as an instance, purchased for little less than its weight in gold, only for its age. It was not less brittle, nor better painted, than the modern, he observes. At that point, alas ! Time extinguishes the good doctor’s upness-to-date.

In the previous year he had written over the signature “ Peter Plenty ” as the husband of a buyer of bargains. He pours derision upon his wife’s “ useless lumber ; ” he cannot step within the door of his parlour for the piles of china there, while the woman in the next alley “ lives by scouring the brass and pewter, which are only laid up to tarnish again.”

In a yet earlier letter to the *Rambler*,\* he ironically describes himself as a collector, who as a child had gone in for stones and shells, who in maturer years turned to Exotics and Antiques, and “ determined to collect the maps drawn in the rude and barbarous times, before any surveys or just observations.” In the following issue he drops banter and more leniently addresses himself to a serious consideration of the subject again ; and here he notes the “ constant reciprocation of reproaches ”

\* Dec. 29, 1750.



which he observes between men of different studies and how "the collector of shells and stones derides the folly of him who pastes leaves and flowers upon paper." Indeed from Dr Johnson to Mr Barry Pain the *hortus siccus* has ever been regarded as a *frons asinorum*. The reference to old maps, however, comes very nearly home to us, because they happen, at the time of writing, to be widely collected, and, therefore, extensively forged: and they have (with all due obeisance to a great man's memory), that peculiar mellowness which comes very near to beauty, and a certain pleasing oddness which unsophisticated people call "quaint."\*

With parenthetical regard to "quaintness" "Looker On,"† discussing the rules of taste, says that they are liable to the misguidance of false associations, and the silent intrusion of prejudices and

\* Many years before this Addison had gayed the *virtuosi* by the invention of the last will and testament of Nicholas Gimcrack. Having disposed of his various collections, as he deemed fitting, to wife and daughter, Mr Gimcrack goes on: "my eldest son, John, having spoken disrespectfully of his little sister, whom I keep by me in spirits of wine. . . . I do disinherit and wholly cut off from any part of this my personal estate, by giving him a single cockle-shell."

† October 12, 1793.

partialities ; and the public judgement, he declares, must be watched with a nice caution. Verily, he might have foreseen the day when unskillfully modelled and absurd pot animals manufactured in Staffordshire would be ardently collected by admirers of quaintness, and when huge prices were to be paid, and finely produced books written about, the ridiculous Toby jugs of his own time : when the wax fruit that was made long after him to be worshipfully approved beneath the glass domes of the mid-19th century would come, after suffering a long period of scorn and derision, to be admired anew and sought for and collected by sentimental Americans.

Indeed must the public judgement be watched. At the same time associations—though whether false or not it is difficult to decide—do add an impalpable quality to certain objects and do rightly (though personally) cause their possession to be valued for extrinsic reasons. To this aspect of collecting I shall return.

The accumulation of antiques is, at its worst, a better hobby than fret-work ; but to pursue a certain class of specimen for the sake of its kind rather than its quality is to deserve Dr Johnson's bludgeon. The fact is that collecting before Johnson's day and

for very long after it—until, indeed, the early years of the present century—was almost wholly accumulative in a sense: the objects collected were regarded principally as extras, things to be looked at, but not to be used. It must not be forgotten, moreover, that Johnson failed to make the important distinction between the mere collector and the connoisseur: though he does admit that the virtuoso “cannot be said to be wholly useless:” and he did, therefore, perceive the value to a nation of its diletanti.

The Catalogue of the Museum Tradescantium at Lambeth (subsequently the nucleus of the Ashmolean Museum) was published by John Tradescant, the younger, in 1656. The father had been James I's head gardener, and the museum was begun with a view to preserving rare botanical specimens. The catalogue, however, shows that at one time or another all manner of curiosities, such as we might see in private collections or displayed in museums to-day, had been brought together in the first half of the 17th century. There were coins and medals. . . . “Heads cut in agates and crystals . . . divers sorts of ambers with (Flyes) (Spiders)” . . . Japanese swords and daggers, Chinese

armour, and " the knife wherewith Hudson was killed in the N.W. passage or Hudson's bay : " while " The Story of the Prodigall Son carved in wood : antient " is exactly the sort of thing that, rhetorically speaking, I would give a good deal for now ; the sort of thing, too, that was often enough picked up in the later years of the 19th century for a few pence.

Now, humanly speaking, was the knife wherewith Hudson was killed stained with " false associations ? " However commonplace a weapon it certainly was interesting because it had killed Hudson ; and so we should perceive it to be now : we ought, perhaps, not to do so, but we should : remembering that such a knife would be of what I would call Museum interest rather than for private treasuring.

In 1728 Young, in *The Love of Fame*, exclaimed

" How his eyes languish ! how his thoughts  
adore

That painted coat, which Joseph never wore !  
He shows, on holidays, a sacred pin,  
That touched the ruff that touched Queen  
Bess's chin."

I would like to have that sacred pin, for the reason given, and I would show it, not only on holidays, to sympathetic people. But I

am reckoning on the pin being of gold and beautifully fashioned.

False association was excellently satirised by Charles Stuart Calverley in *Precious Stones*.

“ A clod—a piece of orange peel—  
An end of a cigar—  
Once trod on by a Princely heel,  
How beautiful they are ! ”

In the same catagory of ideas is a story of the old Military College at Cowley, for which I can vouch, on the occasion of an inspection by a Royal Personage and his lady. The rooms of a cadet, a relative of mine, were set aside as a cloak-room. “ I have taken the liberty, sir,” said his servant later to this cadet, “ of bottling some of the water’er Royal ’ighness washed ’er ’ands in. T’ain’t often one gets such a chanst.”

There is value by association with a vengeance: though whether that servant’s primary impulse was born of sentimentalism or flunkeyism I am at a loss to decide.

WE rather pride ourselves on our taste nowadays, do we not? We fancy ourselves, not a little by comparison with our "mouldy" forebears of the Victorian era? Let us not, however, deride too scathingly that period from which we have advanced to the New Regent Street and to the pink asbestos tiles on old country cottages. Let us pick up *The Gentleman's Magazine* for 1842 and read there an article on "Ancient Domestic Furniture" in which the writer discusses the magnificent collection formed by Mr Bayliss at the Pryor's Bank, Fulham. He tells us of the prevalance at that period of a taste for antique furniture which "is most decidedly manifested, not only by examples which everyone may happen to know of either (in) ancient mansions, or modern houses in the Elizabethan style, filled with collections of this description, but by the multitude of warehouses which now display their attractive stores, not merely in Wardour Street, but in almost every quarter of the metropolis." He points out that these dealers must be maintained by a certain amount of custom, and that the stock of furniture "remaining in the obscure and poorer habitations of this



country was soon exhausted ; " that therefore large importations had been made from the continent, particularly from Germany, and " not only entire pieces of furniture have been brought to supply the demand, but great quantities of detached and fragmentary portions, and of architectural carvings, have been collected, and worked up into the forms now required by modern convenience. . . . "

In order to be fair to modern scoffers we must admit no doubt but that the early taste for antiques in the 'forties fell into abeyance ; for the multitude of warehouses had certainly decreased considerably by the 'sixties. Nor was the taste a very pure one. A fancy for ancient tradition had been widely formed by the readers of Sir Walter Scott's novels, who had been thrilled with images of the distant past, and a fashion arose for furniture which seemed to satisfy that fancy. But instead of precisely copying old designs the joiners of the period must needs " improve " them, so that there remains to us to-day a quantity of massive and grotesquely carved sideboards and tables which are veritable caricatures of the work of the Elizabethan craftsmen whose inspiration they were supposed to flatter. Occasionally a bed

or a table is found which follows the true tradition at a nearer distance, but these are usually unmistakeable by anyone really familiar with genuine furniture of the implied period.

Not long before the war I went to a sale at Bude in Cornwall, where, amongst a lot of other rubbish, was an armchair of this "Abbotsford" type. As is usual it had been stained quite black. It was very vile. Not so thought a well-to-do visitor, who had come to Bude for golfing purposes, and who, in the crowd of yokels before the sale, examined this chair and waited patiently until it came under the hammer. I observed him and read his intention, and having nothing better to do I waited. Yes: someone bid half a crown: my man made it five bob. He was almost acutely nonchalant, but there was a twinkle in his eye, the hint of a self-congratulatory smirk about his lips. He was perfectly satisfied that a marvel of luck had come his way. What should they know of early Jacobean chairs in this one-horse show? But he must not be eager—no. No one seriously wanted the chair: why should they? It was knocked down to him for eleven shillings. He paid his money then and there, and his face broke into a delightful smile of radiant



happiness. Himself he lovingly carried that clumsy abortion out of the sale room and away. I could see that he felt the luck almost too great to be true. He must make very sure of it. I hope that it still gives him pleasure.

Referring again to *The Gentleman's Magazine* it is interesting to know that Wardour Street was even then the chief resort of collectors. By the end of the century that street had become a by-word, though during the last fifteen years it has been almost denuded of antique shops except second-hand jewellers'.

The *Magazine* gives a number of small wood-engravings illustrating objects at the Pryor's Bank sale, and states the prices realised by them. A chair dated 1621 went for 3 *l.* and another, somewhat similar to it, for eight guineas; a third carved with the arms of Bouchier, 5*l.* 10*s.* 6*d.* A German court cupboard, superbly carved, if we are to judge by the engraving, brought 17*l.* 6*s.* 6*d.*; an English 16th century chimney-piece went for 76*l.* 13*s.*; a desk of 1624 brought four guineas, another of somewhat earlier date, 1*l.* 3*s.*; and the "whole fabric of a Gothic room, 31 ft. by 12 ft. with a lining of old carvings and stained glass windows," was bought

in at 185 guineas, which was considered "below its value." Apart from the many pictures, Walpole's collection at Strawberry Hill, also dispersed in that year, included the same sort of antiques as are collected now: carved oak panels, china, an example of Grinling Gibbons' work, and snuff boxes. Walpole, too, had a chimney-piece, said to have been designed by Holbein for Henry VIII, which brought 33*l*. An old oak panel, carved with the arms of Henry VII, was bought by the Earl of Derby for 6*l*. 16*s*. 6*d*.; the same nobleman purchased a carved coat of arms of Queen Elizabeth; while he paid 21*l*. for an oak chair.

These prices are extremely interesting. It is true that for the most part they are ridiculously small when compared with the prices that similar specimens would make now; but the discrepancy among the less important items is not nearly so great as might be imagined. For the Gothic room 185 guineas was indeed "below its value," and Holbein's chimney-piece for 33*l*. is the stuff of a robber's dream: but good desks of the 17th century have been bought within the last twenty years for not more than twice the larger sum named here, and occasionally for less. Before

the war, dated chairs of the kind, as indicated here, were frequently bought for 5*l.*, and the same figure was considered then to be a fair price for any usual chest of drawers of the 17th century which did not come definitely under the head of the finest craftsmanship. Even in the 'fifties and 'sixties, when taste in domestic decoration was at its lowest ebb, fine foreign specimens, particularly French furniture of the Louis XV and XVI periods, fetched very high prices: for fashionable collectors at all times have found delight in objects of foreign provenance.

As to the stocks of old furniture in the poorer habitations of the country the writer of 1842 was mistaken, for these are not even yet exhausted. It is true that for a long time past dealers have planted spurious and occasionally genuine specimens in farmhouses and cottages, so that they may be observed and bargained for by tourists, and, thereby, owing to the apparent authenticity of their source, may produce higher prices than they would fetch in a London shop; but even so many pieces of old furniture remain in their original country homes. I know a farmer who owns a good 17th-century chest, which may or may not have been in his

house ever since it was made. It is ordinary : it has the customary and conventional carving upon the rails and panels : it is worth 8/. or 10/. of any modest buyer's money. But a busy clergyman,\* trembling lest a poor simpleton should be robbed by a rascally collector, has told the farmer that his chest is worth 100/.

If I were a purist of the last degree I should welcome any circumstance, even of such outrageous dimensions as that, which would tend to keep old furniture in its original or its appropriate environment, rather than that it should be transported to the incongruities of a Kensington flat. For never until—as rarely happens nowadays—you see old furniture rightly arranged in its old home, is it possible to realize how supremely well it looks there. You can fake up a London house so that old country furniture seems pleasant enough in it, and if you happen to possess it and are forced to live in the town, it would, I think, be foolish to get rid of it in order to be perfectly congruous. But the atmosphere of the house, especially if the country furniture is made of oak, will never feel quite convincing.

One day, some years ago, a farmer's wife

\* He is now a bishop. Is it to be wondered at?

of my acquaintance heard a car stop in the road nearby, and a few moments later loud voices and noisy footfalls in the yard, and presently in the house itself. She was alone, making butter, and could not leave it. In another moment cheerful trippers had invaded the dairy, and, hats on heads, had begun to ask questions. "Got any old stuff, missis? Brass candlesticks, china? Anything that belonged to Grandfather?"—and so forth, very jovial and bright. My friend said nothing, but she made a slight gesture towards the doorway where an old sheepdog was silently awaiting orders.

It was in that same dairy (but I was an old friend and no tripper) that I made my first find—not one that was epoch-making, except in so far as it, in retrospect, still somewhat flatters my vanity. Butter was being made, and we were talking, when suddenly I noticed for the first time what I had often merely seen—a chair, rather disreputably covered with an old curtain. Only, to-day, a corner of the loose cover near the ground had become displaced, so that a few inches of turned leg and worm-eaten stretcher were visible. These were of oak. That was enough. Yes: the chair had "always" been there: it was of no use:



it had no back legs, and was propped up in that corner out of the way. I could have it and welcome. There was some trivial monetary adjustment, and the chair was put on a cart and removed. Later, on the floor of a barn, I had the hope, the fear, the tense but dusty delight of stripping off a number of covers—the old curtain, faded chintz firmly tacked beneath it, then American “leather,” then chintz again, and sacking, and wadding. Layer by layer I pulled it away—generations of it, so to speak—and at length the chair stood with its back against a packing case, naked and unencumbered. Then all its members seemed to give at once, and, like a castle built of playing cards, it fell flat upon the floor.

Not a first-rate find, but a pleasant start in life. The back legs were gone: one stretcher out of four remained, and that was worm-eaten past cure. The oaken arms had been at sometime replaced with elm, and these too were hopelessly wormed. Half the seat had rotted away, the panel in the back was badly split. But there remained the beautifully turned legs—all one with the arm supports—and the frame of the back, which was delightfully carved with a simple fish-scale pattern. I had

some odd pieces of old oak kept for purposes of repair: a local joiner made an excellent job of it: and the chair was a chair once more—not a collector's piece, as the dealers say, nothing to do more than write home about, but a very pleasant and richly coloured reminder of the 17th century.

Frazer Tytler, subsequently Lord Woodhouselee, wrote to the *Mirror* in 1779, over the signature Rebecca Prune, as the wife of a grocer, complaining that her husband had suddenly become a "Man of Taste" . . . "It was my husband's ill luck to receive one day from a customer, in payment of a pound of sugar, a crooked piece of silver, which he, at first, mistook for a shilling, but found, on examination, to have some strange characters upon it. . . ." An acquaintance knowing a virtuoso who would be glad to possess the coin, bids the grocer half a guinea. "My poor husband . . . was persuaded from the extent of the offer . . . that he was possessed of a very valuable curiosity." He rejects thirty shillings: and then proceeds to lay out all his savings in antiques.

Once more I rub my eyes. . . . Many years ago I heard of an old lady who was

said to have some rare pewter for sale. I bicycled over fourteen of the worst miles in Devonshire to call upon her. She lived in a little old cottage on the outskirts of a small town: and she played up very well, seeming perfectly indifferent as to whether she traded with me or not. She had for disposal a number of quite usual pewter pint tankards, stamped V.R., for which the current price was then about half a crown, and for which she was somewhat peremptorily asking something in the neighbourhood of their value as silver. I left her, and entering an inn nearby made temporary use of an exactly similar Victorian pint tankard and departed.

Accumulative collecting, the bringing together of extras, still persists; but it marches alongside and occasionally goes hand in hand with a newer and more practical collecting by those who are "accustomed to value everything by its use." The practical collector assembles a houseful of furniture, pictures, books, objects of art, in (or out of) unimpeachable taste, and having filled that house, he then sets about improving that collection, rejecting this or that chair, table, or first edition, disposing of it, and getting in its place something more desirable. This



making of a beautiful home is, I submit, a worthy object in any man's life; and the ambition to that end, properly controlled, is at the disposal of a far greater number of people, who have taste, than poor but unimaginative collectors usually suppose.

It was necessary to qualify that greater number in the preceeding sentence because there is a still huger number of persons without taste who are actuated by "capricious emulations," and who feel the need for collecting, not because they have any inclination towards antiquities, but because they have heard talk of them, because in short it seems to be the correct thing to do. So I return to my pen-nibs, my postage stamps, my fossils. Assuredly these were capricious emulations, and their day was short.

Since writing that I have re-discovered the fossils in a cupboard the other contents of which reminded me that in my childhood I once maintained a small museum. There is a piece of chalky stone with "from Nazareth" written upon it, given me by an evangelical aunt, and some "everlasting" flowers picked upon Majuba Hill during the first Boer War by an uncle who led the retreat across the Ingogo; a Solitary Wasp's nest packed in cotton

wool, and some delightful pieces of mosaic gathered from a Roman pavement by a grandfather; and other matters. I have offered the fossils to a young relation, who thanked me very politely, but did not remove them.

You may say that there is no affinity between the acquisition of pen-nibs and of blue and white china, that collecting in these concerns means two different things. But that is not so. Pen-nibs satisfied a childish but a definitely æsthetic need: they seemed to me beautiful. I distinctly recall the thrill of possession when I was given a steel pen gilded near the point. The damascene effect of gold and steel blended together was very delightful.

When one leaves a preparatory school childhood passes into abeyance. It is not until one goes to the University that, as Mr Beerbohm said,\* the nonsense which was knocked out of one at school is all put gently back. The adolescent age was for me a desolate emptiness. Marbles, whether regarded as the implements of a game, or as objects to be collected were not, in my time, widely encouraged at the the greater Public Schools. Even at my

\* "Going back to school." *More* by Max Beerbohm, 1899

prep. school a taboo had suddenly, at the beginning of one term, been put upon them at the instance of a senior boy, whose elder brother had informed him that they were definitely plebeian. The only collector that I recall in those awkward years was a boy, who, regarded by medical authority as too delicate for Rugby Football, spent his time bug-hunting. Myself not in such happy case, I should have probably taken a vague and sidelong interest in his beetles and butterflies had I, little reptile that I was, dared so flaunt my independence of the God of Games. For that boy was a good bug-hunter and formed a considerable collection: and I love to think how in later years, having grown out of the slight weaknesses which forbade him football, he, when members of the XV, who had sneered at him, were installed in subordinate positions in the City of London, went for a leisurely walk across Africa, and got the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society for incredible explorations in Mongolia. Justice is seldom poetic, but there it was lyrical.

At all events I cannot remember that, having grown out of my museum, I made any sort of collection for many years: neither indeed did any question of

furniture or bric-a-brac interest me until I decorated my rooms at Oxford in the most deplorable taste. (One thing I did *not* do: I never displayed photographs upon my mantelpiece, signed or otherwise, of actresses with whom I was not acquainted. The impulse to do this always struck me as unaccountable: and it was, in my day, quite a common one). Now at the beginning of one term I brought back with me from home and hung upon my wall two old pistols that had been given to me in my childhood. One was of brass, a small, bell-mouthed flint-lock—rare, I believe: the other a later weapon, made by a Frenchman, long-barrelled, fitted for percussion caps, but having the hammer at the side—in order, presumably, to give a clear sight. They, especially the brass fellow, were rather old, rather mellow and pleasant. I had loved them when I was nine or ten because they were lethal instruments, I loved them now because—it is difficult to say. It is desperately difficult to say why many collectable objects appeal to one. Beauty? Hardly. Good craftsmanship? Certainly. (But then some of the vilest mid-19th-century chiffoniers and what-nots are joined with exquisite craft: that is their tragedy).

Well, and that mellowness again, and association, and one thing or another. I used to look at my pistols and think how nice it would be to have other things that would go, suitably, with them.\*

\* The curious will see them illustrated, with other items of no great moment mentioned in this essay, in *The Connoisseur* for August, 1919.

### III

THE ownership of second-hand goods brings with it the second-hand but appropriate reflexion that the time, the energy, the enthusiasm, the love and hate, the hope, despair, and money that I spend upon them, might be devoted even selfishly (if we must be moral), to better purposes. Better? More practical? What do I want with a new caricature by Gilray when I really need a new pair of shoes?—No, no. It is of little use to ask a collector a question like that: and when the collector himself asks the question he will know quite comfortably what the answer will be.

Many years ago I read, in a domestic periodical, an article about old furniture by a woman who seemed to take a pride in a very blatant and overbearing philistinism. Alongside a column of inexpensive receipts and some helpful advice about the new baby, or the carpet, this woman exhorted her readers to be practical in the matter of their furniture and decoration. She had inherited, she declared, an old country house but preferred a “sensible” villa in a convenient suburb, with a bathroom, with electric light. Had come to her also a fine lot of (gloomy) old oak furniture,



which " had been in the family." This she sold, having in its stead bright cheerful stuff that the children could knock about: some Nankin and Crown Derby were replaced by " sensible " crocks that the children or the maid could smash without implicating the owner's heart. The writer was choke-full of the most common sort of sense; or so it seemed. Her readers would be flattered (it is one of the main objects of that kind of literature to flatter readers) and would say: " Ah, now *there's* a sensible woman with no nonsense about her."

But what of that minority of her readers who owned such things as she was tilting at? Ostensibly the article was addressed to them. Would they be moved thereby to the profitable disposal of their inherited goods? There are persons of all classes, and of all but one creed, who have no feeling either of sentiment or delight in such things, who are unable to perceive the nice proportions of the simple panelled cupboard, the dignity of Hepplewhite's line, whom no teaching nor intuition can make aware that the colour of mahogany polished in 1750 is different—ah, how marvellously different!—from that which first shone in 1850. Such folk as these might well be reminded that, without

expense, the be-mirrored "suites" of their heart's desire and their soul's true expression was within their grasp.

At the first glance I quite believed this writer to be one who liked ugliness for its safety and modernity for its sanitariness: and I thought that she was fighting the Devil's battle, when she might have been teaching an ideal. It appeared so obvious that the woman was either a very dangerous character, or else that she couldn't think how else to fill up her allotted inches on the page. Now I see that I was mistaken. She was but an enthusiast, for whose mild delinquency I have frank admiration. It was in this way: a number of people known to be, or almost certain to be, readers of the periodical in question had in their cottages delectable corner-cupboards and bell-metal candlesticks which the lady coveted but could not persuade them to sell. They would read her article, and, being sensible, would see how much more sensible it would be to part with these things to the lady who, anonymous in journalism, would call the day after publication.\* (If it is printed in a "book", it must be right).

\* But such a case as this hardly bears comparison with that of the Wimpole Street specialist, who, in



Still, there certainly are people who are sincere in despising old furniture. Don't tell me that I am building a wall in order to demolish it: there really are, and happily, for Heaven knows that there are more than enough collectors as it is. The point is—need I say?—that children should not knock about any sort of furniture, nor smash any sort of china; that if they are not brought up to respect their own homes, they will seldom respect anything; that the restraint imposed by certain of the grown-up quarters of the house is a necessary and wise restraint; that this is for children a matter of habit and not of hardship, a matter of manners—quite as important as manners to servants or aunts: that grown-ups too gain by some little sacrifice of convenience to seemliness.

It is an extremely valuable part of a general education to be brought up in a house where, as a child, you “must not touch,” where things are for one reason or another valuable, and where, especially, order to create a reduction in prices, for his own ends, in the antiquarian market, began to spread a theory that the germs of fell disease were propagated by old furniture. He only desisted from his unscrupulous design, and lost all interest in his own collection, when he discovered that the theory *had all too solid a basis on fact*.

there is a certain amount of old furniture. It is a good start in life, particularly for a collector. How far such general surroundings are apt to effect one's general taste it is difficult to say: in the long run the effect is probably good. When I think of my Oxford rooms, I realize that the run is indeed a long one.

It is hard to believe that true connoisseurship can be inculcated in any man who has not been bred to an appreciation of good things, which, however humble their situation or prosaic their use, are always worth while and in the end—it is still not needless to say—cheapest. May I never be too poor to set my face against make-shifts, rubbish, and the products of the sixpenny bazaar. I remember as a very young child learning to be proud of my sailor-suit because it had been properly made by a sailor and not, like those of my little neighbours, by a boy's outfitter. It was the real thing, genuine and authentic: those others were shams. I am told that in this preference—at any rate in this purely private comparison—lie the seeds of snobbery, that snobbery which decrees a certain sort of tobacco, a particular cut of coat, or way of arranging a tie to be "good form," while certain deviations from that

sort, cut, and way constitute "bad form," and something that is "not done." Nothing of the sort. Snobbery arises out of arbitrary distinction, that is, fashion, not from a love of excellence; though people who are unable to appreciate excellence, or whose grapes are sour, hurl that brick-bat.

Nowadays we do not regard the decorative taste of the Prince Consort as unexceptionable; but we do owe him a certain due of gratitude for having drawn attention, from so ever obtuse an angle, to questions of taste.

In my home the old things were partly inherited and partly collected, and though many of the latter were of practical use—chairs, tables, cupboards, besides ornamental porcelain—they were still what I have called extras. The period fetish had in those days won no observance: no attempt was made to appoint a Queen Anne drawing-room or a Jacobean hall. There were just new acquisitions from time to time which were arranged with a rough suitability amongst old friends, and which, because one soon grew used to them, and not because of any rule, seemed to blend very well with the whole scene. They were in a sense extras, but they were

nevertheless *used*. And on all counts to use good things is better than to hoard them. Many fine folk who jeer at the poor man's parlour, which is only sat in on state occasions, or at his piano, which no one in the family can play, are guilty of precisely the same fault when they allow no one to sit on the Chippendale chairs, or drink tea from the Sèvres cups.

One lives and learns, profitting by the mistakes of one's elders, improving (I hope) upon their taste. But I do still cling to a kind of easy sentimentalism in my surroundings: I like my bits of things about me, and if according to the rules they don't mix well—be damned to the purists. I like a home, not a museum: or rather, if I found myself wanting to keep a number of things which would not comfortably fit into the home, or would overcrowd it, I would have also a frank museum—a room devoted to specimens of this or that, conveniently arranged to be looked at, as extras. But for every day, for my personal encompassment, sooner than rigid correctitude give me the stark vulgarity that I have chosen for myself. If it is "me" to enjoy be-mirrored side-boards or plush-mounted views of Eastbourne—hurrah! If, to be a little more

reasonable, the adjacence of country-made mahogany chairs and an oak court-cupboard brings contentment—though I know it to be in defiance of the rules—let them be.

You have only to go in to a room which has been decorated and furnished *carte blanche* by a paid expert, where your hostess pours a ha'p'orth of tea from forty guineas worth of pottery, where each splendour takes your breath, and each is exquisitely desirable, where everything is right and nothing wrong, to know what I mean. The whole result is chilling to the very marrow. Give me rather enlarged photographs of Tom and Mary on their wedding day, and a whole mantelpiece crammed with pink vorses. . . . No: not quite, for that also is a convention: but something warm and human and lovingly got and grown together.

Too much exactitude suggests priggishness and coldness and inaccessibility to human failings. An occasional departure from the rules or the colour scheme in a finely furnished room makes the onlooker realize that ordinary human beings, like you and me, Mum, live there and use the place and drink beer or tea there and write letters and quarrel and tell stories and read



books. I once possessed a pair of simply carved walnut-wood chairs, made in about the year 1680, and bought by my father forty years ago for fifteen shillings each. They were very beautiful. The hand-cut mouldings on the backs of these chairs were ever so slightly inexact, the surface having irregularities which caught the light, and made one think sometimes that it had been deliberately faceted. It was delicious to run one's finger along that ancient, long-polished, softly uneven surface. At the moment I am sitting in a more comfortable chair, the back rail of which has a moulding cut out by a machine: it is mathematically exact. It is ugly in any case; but even if the design were a good one that machine-run moulding would kill it. Here is just the commonplace distinction between art and mechanics.

I have a straight eye and this is irritated by the sight of a picture-frame hanging crookedly: but it is not irritated by various and rather incongruous frames hanging on the same wall. I am used to them: this picture or that would lose something of its power to please me, if in order to match the others, its frame were changed. . . . The paid expert glances contemptuously down upon my little rebellion, just as my tailor's



cutter once informed me that Mr Sarto, his master, did not *at all like*—some unfashionable detail for which I had a preference. Good God, what are tailors coming to? (I changed mine.) No: I'll have my own wrong, mistaken way and be happy in it. Bow-wow.

Not that I have any puritanical objection to luxury and true magnificence: only it seems to me to imply a greater responsibility than I care to face. It also implies sums of money which, in a personal regard, I have seldom had the ambition to imagine. Let me have a few good things, and do, do let me have my cupboard full of old lumber and rubbish that, for association's sake, I have not the heart to burn. What is the good of keeping all those papers? I can't answer the question, and why should I trouble to do so? Those old manuscripts, letters, photographs give me little real satisfaction, and yet—they may as well be kept. Vanity? Sentiment? Why not?

No. Stately grandeur on a large scale is not for me. Neither is one of its modern substitutes, which may roughly be described as Art-in-the-Home. By that I mean self-conscious art or artiness. In the 'eighties and 'nineties it was represented, I

think, by be-ribanded flower-pots and Japanese fans upon the walls: to-day we shall find a timid reproduction of an oak drawer-table meticulously bisected by a narrow strip of embroidered cotton which is meant to look like linen, while the Tottenham-court-cupboard is adorned with a number of rubbishy brass implements, and a copper warming-pan hangs by its side. (Why should a warming-pan be regarded as an ornament? Quaint, I suppose. If the expanse of polished metal pleases you, let it hang in its proper place in the kitchen.) There are many other forms of Art-in-the-Home, from which Heaven defend me, and most of them are fakes. By that I don't mean that the component specimens are necessarily forgeries; often they are not: but the attitude of mind which presides over their arrangement is spurious, insincere, worked up. "If one has no money," says a character in a book by Mrs Basil de Selincourt, "one must either be æsthetic or dowdy, and I have always preferred to be dowdy." That observation was in respect of clothes, but the same implied rule is equally golden in regard to household possessions.

A year or two ago I went into a great church in Essex. My first impression was

of one of the most beautiful interiors I had ever seen. The church is very well lit, its columns rise unencumbered by ugly pews, there are curtains and banners of exquisite colours, there was nothing that did not delight the eye, nothing in detail spurious. But on second thoughts—no. My eye was still happy, but my instinct shrank away. The note was forced. I suddenly realized that this church was a stunt: the impalpable atmosphere made me think of folk-songs and morris-dances and the whole bag of self-conscious art-tricks. The church is lovely, but it is all wrong.

Short of costly magnificence a little responsibility is clearly a salutary discipline. It is good to be encumbered with things which it is a manifest duty to look after and to preserve. It is an especially good thing for people of small means. In a world where the money standard is becoming more and more paramount, it is a great aid to self-respect to have and to hold possessions of beauty if not of price. Very rightly you will say that self-respect of any quality should be entirely independent of banking accounts. It should be. But we know very well that below a certain wavering minimum it seldom is. When we hear of people who, at prodigious

inconvenience, and in the face of tempting offers, stick to an old family house, does not the decency in us pay tribute even while we utter platitudes about their lack of common sense? And in the same way I like to hear of instances, which are not, after all, so very uncommon, of cottagers and poor folk who definitely and at any price refuse to part with the possessions of their forefathers. Those of us who have been taught to treasure our grandfathers' swords should be the first to acclaim the rare but existing spirit which makes a man take pride in his grandfather's chisel.

AND this leads me to reflect upon the value we attach to things we have collected. (And for the present purpose let collecting include acquiring, whether by gift, inheritance, purchase, or theft.) We have seen what the 18th-century writers thought about it, and we daily recognize the current justice of their reproaches. Without exploring the whole question of aesthetics we can say and quite roughly maintain that beauty is a personal thing and subjective: if some object is "an assemblage of graces which pleases the eye," or is that which "delights the mind," that object is, for us, beautiful. And we must therefore allow a good deal of latitude to individuals.

An artist, whose work I greatly admire, complained to me the other day of the bay of Rapallo—"all that damned beauty," he called it. (I thought he was going to call it pretty-pretty, but he went the whole hog). I knew what he meant, and I am sure that the preference in his mind was for a big gasometer with a group of factory chimneys seen in the murk of winter's dawn. I am not sneering. I understand that preference, though I do not share it.



It is likely too that the gasometer has some extrinsic meaning for him such as the bay of Rapallo has for me: that is, each is beautiful by association. But here association may be dispensed with. I only throw in the suggestion as a sop to those who cannot believe that gasometers may ever be beautiful. I remember many years ago when sailing in the Aegean, with the sense of young adventure and the strangeness of foreign life and scenes strong in me, realizing that very fact. Beautiful what I saw undoubtedly was, with the glory of hot sunshine and unrippled sea: but the delight in novelty was prone, I even then perceived, to add its weight to my acceptance of the greater word, and I recalled that high excitement, that rare and sudden rending of a veil, which has sometimes vouchsafed to me in sordid London streets a beauty that has seemed absolute.

But association of one sort or another is entirely necessary to excuse the value that we place upon certain objects we have collected. I have some oak panels representing biblical subjects—Adam and Eve, Abraham and Isaac. Their appearance seems to suggest that they were carved late in the 16th century, not with great skill. They came, I believe, from a church

in the Midlands. They were bought, at a village jumble sale, I am sure, for eighteen pence each. They were arranged on a bench between a pair of Squire's cast-off boots and a work-basket of coloured straw. That price is probably about right for when I last heard the story of their purchase it was sixpence, and I heard it three times, and the price was reduced by that amount each time. It puts me in mind of Stevenson's *The Bottle Imp*. The sale, we may be certain, was for a worthy object.

One has to talk of prices sometimes because a lucky bargain is undoubtedly part of the fun of collecting. Smallness of cost is a legitimate cause of self-congratulation. Though the rich ship-owner, who had been to Christie's, and who, when I asked him if he had bought anything, said: "Nothing to speak of: a few prints, a fiver each," without explaining what sort of prints they were or by whom engraved, is the sort of fellow I want to see thoroughly and expensively swindled: likewise that other, who in discussing antiques once informed me that there was not a single "piece" in his bedroom that had cost less than—I forget. In my innocence I thought that sort of thing was out of date by thirty years or so, until I met

North-country business men who got money out of the war.

Be it far from me, though, to make virtue of necessity. The poor, the modest collector may greatly enjoy himself, may from time to time lay his hands upon something just a little magnificent. But it is very foolish to sentimentalize over second-rate bargains, as many poor collectors do, flattering themselves that their taste, discretion, and hoarded ha'pence are superior to the rich man's casual prodigality. They may be: they often are: but the rich collector can make certain, if he has those other qualities, of always getting fine things, and the poor collector cannot. Whether the pleasure derived by one, who, at the point when two hundred guineas have been bid for a gorgeous bit of marqueterie, nods calmly over his diamond pin, is as great as that wrung from a piece of porcelain that has been scraped and scratched and saved up for by a needy governess, who can say? These things are relative, (and I do not like marqueterie.)

To return to the panels: they are nearly black, and it is only on the backs of them that you see that ripe rich colour which is one of the chief delights of old oak. By no standard that I can think of can they be

called beautiful. But they please me. They are odd and queer, but time and trouble went to making them, and a sense of humour. See the fig leaves, each with its long purposeful stem that curves awkwardly and self-consciously from the border of the design on either side for Adam and for Eve. See the dog sitting on his haunches and laughing at the Serpent. There is a crude vigour too with which the angel throws himself back as with both hands he tugs at Abraham's sword. And they are old. Precisely copy these "detached and fragmentary portions" to-day, and there would be no virtue in them. Much of their virtue goes, too, if they are "worked up into forms now required by modern convenience."

I derive a pleasure from old oak, either furniture or ornamental carvings, which no lack of ease or suitability can bate. Long as is the record of imported woods in England (and even walnut has only been grown here since the 16th century), oak appeals to an historical sense and a racial prejudice. The sedateness of walnut-wood, the beauty, comfort, and convenience of mahogany, the elegance of satin-wood—I admit and acclaim them all. But oak, whether we are thinking of the

worn splendours of the Gothic, the richness of Tudor and Jacobean workmanship, or the homely simplicity of furniture made throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, appeals to my sentiments before, most justly, it arouses my admiration. Surrounded by old oak I feel curiously at home, mentally at rest. The sight and the feel of it induce a sort of interior comfort. They are so reassuring. See that panelling: it was put together three hundred years ago, without nail or glue—just fitted up and held with oaken pegs. See that chimney-piece with absurd caryatides between the panels: "Every one knows," writes Mr A. L. N. Russell,\* in an extremely useful little book, "the typical Jacobean mantel-piece or doorway, with hideous figures of leering satyrs or over-abundant females which, half-way down, turn into columns. . . . There was never any period in English History when architectural detail was so debased and hideous. . . ." Regarded architecturally, these satyrs and disappointing nymphs deserve this author's reprehension: but age, as such, has given them a sanction: they may be ugly, but they are amusing.

• Architecture. By A. L. N. Russell. Chatto and Windus. 1927.



See,—and certainly I see it with greater delight—a more austere chimney-piece plainly panelled, or with architectural mouldings; and sit beneath it at the open fire, smoking a pipe or drinking wine. Cigars and cocktails are out of harmony with ancient oak, which calls for the companionship of big dogs, for calf-bound books, for the snug comfort of a velvet jacket, for candlelight.

A well-proportioned oak-panelled room, or better still, a white-washed room with moulded oaken beams elbowed to upright moulded posts upon the walls, would be, I maintain, an ideal setting for love and laughter, work and play, drinking and eating, for all human joy. Would be? Shall be, by Gad. . . . Such a room, well-lit, large, not too low nor too lofty, is noble before you have put a stick of furniture into it. And the furniture is of secondary importance. But what lingering happiness there would be in collecting the appropriate, few, severe delights which would make that room complete! There should be two or three pictures, not more: a sombre dignified old portrait, and a painting of fruit and flowers—jewels of vermillion and purple and vivid green and heavenly blue, white, and yellow, and

cinnamon, against a background of thrilling black. And for further gaiety, let there be many coats of arms—be my strict right to them never so distantly collateral—blazoned on little wooden shields hanging against the panelled oak, their formal patterns complementing the angled mouldings of the chimney-piece, their colours radiant with primary directness in their demure setting.

Here, somewhere, shall hang too that pair of heads that were bought at about the same time as the carved panels. These also came from a church, I think; were also carved, not crudely, late in the 16th century. Probably they were ornaments on the ends of roof beams. Their colour is rich and dark brown, the modelling of the hair and coif is in each case of a high order, to handle their glassy smoothness is an enjoyment. Who was the talented carver who made them? Was he a Fleming earning his living in England, or an Englishman following the Flemish tradition? Somewhere lies buried yet another artist in complete oblivion. . . .

In that connexion, what English names have come down to us before that of the wood-carver Grinling Gibbons? After him, and through the 18th century we

find plenty: and while historical research has discovered for us much that we needed to know, the prevalent tendency for exhuming irrelevant facts about people has extended to cabinet-makers and designers, so that we can scarcely see the wood for the family trees of the men who worked in it.

Oh, by the way, Thomas Sheraton was a Baptist preacher. . . .

I never look for long at that pair of heads without thinking of the joiner's shop in which they were once for a long time stored. It was in a back street of a small Derbyshire town, and a number of our possessions went to my friend Amos Johnson for repair. Why the heads were kept in his shop I cannot remember: they stood in no need of treatment. Perhaps old Amos bought them for my father: perhaps they were "fragmentary portions" to be "worked up," which was a little failing in collectors commoner in the 'eighties than it is now. Happily, they never were, and they remained untouched.

Something was always being restored or made by Amos Johnson, or so it seems, looking back to my early childhood. My father and I would walk into that malodorous town from the country, and I would

stand—for hours was it?—against one of the benches in the shop that was always fragrant with wood-shavings. Ever since then a carpenter's shop has given me a peculiar contentment: in the same way as a good picture has it bewitched me, and it has gratified the same predilection. There were the two windows, a big one with the bench on which I leaned beneath it, with ranks and tiers of chisels and gouges and augers that I must never touch: and a little one on the opposite side of the shop, full of dust and cobwebs, with glue pots and other paraphernalia upon a shelf adjacent. Beneath that was another bench and a lathe. And in the middle of the room stood trestles, with a carcase of a chest of drawers upon it, or, likely, a coffin, or a cupboard door. Amos was a good-looking old man, with kindly twinkling eyes and a curly grey beard, and he lurched about his shop, for he was very lame, and my father and he would talk of tenons and the grain of different timbers, and all sorts of matters which I but vaguely apprehended. They were two high-priests of cabinet-making, the amateur and the pro, and I look at the handiwork of each before me as I write—the picture-frames with diagonal keys of veneer, so made that nothing short of a

saw will part the mitred corners; the box that contains my note-paper joined with dovetails that are hardly perceptible, or, again, the cupboard designed by the one and built by the other nearly fifty years ago, whose door closes with a soft, whispering breath: and I remember with gratitude that I was taught these and other fine distinctions of first-rate craftsmanship before I reached my teens. That, and the importance of going to a good tailor. And clothes are pertinent here, for what is a love of good work of any sort but a dandyism of the mind?

My father, entirely and indeed absurdly modest in his own accomplishment, held the old fellow in signal esteem, and bade me watch him, and to note the fastidious method and precision he brought to every job. Old Amos loved good work for its own sake, and the two of them taught me a lesson which I was not to apply for very many years, but which, all the same, I never forgot. For it is in the unmistakable and tender fondness for the work, that lies implicit in every piece of good furniture, or carving, in the sword-hilt of chased steel, in the casket with its intricate and secret locks, in the fire-basket of wrought iron, in the sculptured



cameo, even and especially in the decoration upon the tools of the tradesman himself, that discloses for us its essential excellence.

Here, too, in that room, somewhere on a table or stand could worthily have stood (but can't) that superlative oak box I once bought, and gave away. It was of the kind commonly called a bible box: unusually deep, finely carved with Tudor roses, of a colour to match the heads already described, with a plain wrought-iron lock plate. I got it in Liverpool, during the war. There was a dealer much of whose time I wasted in conversation and whose brains I sucked to some advantage. He took me one day to an old house he used as a store and repairing shop. There amongst an assortment of broken chairs and chests which had lost bits of veneer and so forth, I spotted this box on the floor. One of his men kept oily rags in it and a bottle of turpentine. It was dirty, and evidently somewhat disregarded. So evidently, indeed, that my suspicions were aroused. Stupidly, I erected an edifice of guile upon this simple and perfectly straightforward foundation. I nearly let it slip through my fingers because I thought—so vilely does

the detective spirit twist one's mind—that my dealer had artfully allowed the box to grow dirty, had elaborately neglected it, had deliberately put it in an obscure place to catch a roaming eye. He wanted 3/. for it. I could remember the time when it might have been bought for as many shillings: but memory of that sort is of no use except to annoy one. And I knew then that the box was reasonably cheap, and I know it much better now. I paused. I lifted it up and dusted it and looked hard at and bought it. When it was well-cleaned and polished anew, I laughed to think that I had even doubted its authenticity.

For that room I shall want a good table, and I live in hope. What has happened to another, may, however unlikely, happen to me. A friend of mine, a doctor, went one day, into one of the “obscure and poorer habitations of this country,” and while prescribing for the old lady who lived there saw a table which took his fancy. Yes: said she, it was a good enough table, but heavy and awkward to move. She had bought it last week at the sale at ——— House for four and sixpence, since no one bid against her. What she really wanted was a good kitchen table. Right,

says the doctor, and gives her one and half a guinea besides, and takes away that other. He too had been at the sale at —— House. Neither he nor several dealers (of sorts) had perceived that very dirty old table, which had been pushed aside in the scullery where it had been used for ignoble purposes for many years. It was only when he saw it separated from dented buckets and lumber, in a good light, that my friend recognized the table for what it was—a long, pleasantly narrow, golden brown affair with plainly turned legs, massive stretchers, and a moulding upon the top rail: the sort of thing that is usually called a refectory table, made in the middle of the 17th century. It only wanted cleaning and polishing with bees' wax to be an abiding joy. In despite of rough usage there was a good skin to it under the dirt, and the doctor was, fortunately, just in time to save it from the hot soda-water, which the old lady would unquestionably have used if she had kept it a day or two longer. And this, which sounds like a fairy story, came actually to pass since the war.

Into that room must go the clock—another bit of luck, though not of such monstrous proportions. It is enough to

say that it is a lantern clock, made in London somewhere round about the year 1680, by a known master-maker whose name is engraved upon its delightful brass face, that the pendulum hangs oddly down in front of that face (though that may be due to some repairer's eccentricity), that it keeps excellent time, that, to be sure, it cost just one-sixteenth of its market price at home, and that, finally, it was seen by sharper eyes than mine (which, nevertheless are, so to put it, at my disposal) in an ordinary antique-dealer's shop—in a foreign country.

And pewter would go well in that ideal room. Yes: I know. The conjunction of pewter and old oak is hackneyed, but only in the sense that moonlight on the Parthenon and that sonata of Beethoven, which has just occurred to you, are hackneyed. They went with each other originally; they go with each other now. Pewter—I think of that old girl with the tankards, and I think of prices and the morality of collectors. . . . I badly wanted some pewter once: and remembering that no chance must ever be neglected, no stone unturned, I asked an old handmaiden of my family whether she knew of any in private ownership. By a wonderful fluke the turning of

that first stone revealed treasure. Yes: last year during her holiday at her old home in Nottinghamshire, she had seen some nice pewter plates in a neighbour's house. They had marks on the back. She would write about them. Her letter just saved them from being sold as old metal to a man who went round with a cart. There were two big trenchers and four plates. The owner wanted for the lot a little more (but not much) than the old-metal man had offered. The distance was far too great to make a personal inspection worth the while. It was a slight risk to take compared with any usual bet. I took it, and some days later, by train, packed in a hamper, the pewter arrived. Three of the plates bore the crest of a family which had lived in that part of Nottinghamshire, all bore the London mark and the "touch" of one Leapidge who flourished at the end of the 17th century. Boiled first in a copper with an armful of hay, and then polished again and again with persistence and energy, they shone with that subdued refulgence, which seems to have more colour, more character than silver.

But I see that if I am not very careful I shall get that room too damnably right,



after all. I must think of some pleasant inconsistency.

Such luck as this, such greater luck as befell the doctor, is rare nowadays, and the search for hidden treasure takes far more time than it used to do, its result is far less sure. Old frequenters of the Caledonian Market at Islington, where marvels were once salvaged at the cost of pence, have for many years now shaken sad heads at the Rolls-Royces that have purred up that romantic hill, at the fur coats that have emerged from their softly-shutting doors. The market has long been found out, with the consequence, as I suspect, that many a dealer in the heart of London sends Tom, the odd job man, with a cart-load of goods which have remained too long unsold in the shop, and Tom offers them at a stall in the market on Friday mornings at a higher price than he would expect to get in, perhaps, Soho. He then allows himself to be beaten down to the normal price—"Free arf crahns. I give yer me barble oaf it cost *me* more. Go to a top 'at shop and what'll they ask yer? Free pahnds!"—and the customer is delighted. It must be a bargain, for he made it in the cattle-market.

I have in the past bought excellent

furniture at Islington for its price as fire-wood—solid oak chairs of about the year 1800, and oddments of various kinds—but I don't expect ever to net anything really fine there, unless it is a book. For *fine* things, in the way of furniture at all events, are in perfect condition and have never been outside a good home, have always been tenderly cared for, and are not, therefore, likely to be found elsewhere than in auction-rooms and the shops of good dealers.

There is, when all is said for holes and corners and unlikely speculations, a great deal to recommend the knowledgeable dealer, who spends the greater part of his day in acquiring that to which, however conscientious and indefatigable a collector you may be, you can bestow a less proportion of time, a proportion fixed by your other occupations and ardours. There are far more ignorant than dishonest dealers, men and especially women who have served no sort of apprenticeship. With just a pleasant taste for old stuff, with or without some knowledge of prevailing prices, they are utterly unenlightened in any one particular of the trade they practice. And that trade embraces any number of different classes of antiques,

any two of which require a lifetime of study and experience.

We generally take it for granted that a tradesman knows his job: we are apt to forget that the framers of pictures sometimes bungle a mitre, or that there are grocers who cannot tell chalk from cheese. We do say that one grocer is better than another: we say that he keeps better stuff: but we seldom realize that it is ignorance more than dishonesty which distinguishes them. So with dealers in antiquities, of whom in London there are now upwards of five hundred as against less than twenty, (accepting the authority of the Post Office Directory), in 1860. The fashion has given what seems like an opportunity to dozens of inept and unqualified folk to earn a living in a picturesque and agreeable manner. In they rush.

There are, however, a fair number of good dealers, who understand their business, which, amongst other things, is to save collectors a lot of time and trouble.

THE true collector is vain. It is not enough for him to possess objects of art or interest, he must show them to his friends, and is just a little hurt if they do not respond with appreciation. And I mean appreciation and not necessarily praise. If my friend comes to see me and finds fault with my cupboard; if, understanding old furniture, he tells me that it has been stripped within the last thirty years; that, being good of its kind, this is a pity and that it will never look right in my lifetime: or, if, not expert in antiques but, being generally conversant with the laws of High Decency and Decorum, he intimates that the proportions are clumsy: or, if he is frankly envious and gives his reasons, I am satisfied. My personal pleasure in my possessions is extreme, but I like them to be noticed.

There are, however, all sorts of belongings which I revere, but which are above, or at any rate beyond, any question of exterior interest. We return, in this connexion, to the "pin that touched the ruff that touched Queen Bess's chin," and to value by association. "Always stick to that coffee-pot," said my elders to me long

ago, "it belonged to your great-grandfather," and, D.V., I always shall. It is a good coffee-pot, made before silver began to get florid and over-ornamented: but if it were an ugly one, and there was nothing else of my forebear's to keep, I should still like it, and I should have something of a struggle with myself not to work up an admiration for its intrinsic merits.

Of that good man, its original owner, a poacher is declared to have observed: "I'd rather be sent to prison by t'owd Squire than be let off by anyone else." Examined on its merits, this does not sound a too probable story: it is even comparable to the enjoyment by foxes of being hunted which I have heard alleged by fox-hunters. But I shall stick to that poacher as well as to the coffee-pot for reasons which I shall suggest anon.

This is a hard and exact age; the past for the past's sake is not much in favour; sentimentalism, which is easy emotion (but not always spurious), does not pursue its sebaceous, tear-trickling way as it once did; lumps in the throat, even for patriotic or hymeneal occasions have hastily to be converted into catarrh. The pendulum has swung away from sugar and the avoid-



ance of all "unpleasantness," to an almost morbid desire for accuracy, whether in historical perspective, or the description of the family plate, or the distinctions between virtue and morality. The worst of pendulums is that they swing too far. (The somewhat uncommon "pro-Boer" of 1899 is totally eclipsed to-day by those who can believe anything of England except that she is ever right).

There was that knife wherewith Hudson was killed. . . .

I have a cream jug, quite a pretty one, which belonged to Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Its pedigree is established to my satisfaction; though, being of a purely domestic interest, there is no point in giving it. But these pedigrees of collectable objects need careful watching. Inexactitude with regard to antiques often leads to grievous disappointment. Family traditions of the most respectable age do not always bear scrutiny. Think of the number of beds Queen Elizabeth slept in! Yet in many houses that she did so has been accepted as a fact for several generations. So, the powdering closet becomes the priest's hole: the drawing of a cat by Rowlandson, which the artist himself gave to Major Dashblank's grandfather, is

touched up with undiluted Indian ink, and so lets that animal out of the bag: the dagger which the tourist brought back from Algiers, and which he saw being hammered, bears that final and devastating word "Sheffield" near the hilt. It is with themselves rather than with proposed victims that some collectors are dishonest.

I am still satisfied about that cream jug, for the links in the chain of successive possession seem to have been authenticated beyond cavil: but I know that I have to be careful. I have a pocket-book, a lovely trifle, bound in red morocco, exquisitely tooled, and fastened by a small silver clasp. It was made in the days when, to quote that learned antiquarian, Mr Ralph Edwards, "There was nothing too humble to have pains bestowed upon it." In it there are entries by two hands. The caligraphy of the first is beautiful, ornate, and perfectly formed, so that every letter in the Lord's Prayer, written on the space covered by a threepenny bit, is, under a magnifying glass, legible: there are the Ten Commandments, illustrated, (the drawings of thy neighbour's property, which thou shalt not covet, being especially delightful). A list of the nobility and gentry of

Scotland drawn up in 1684; a copy of a letter dated November 1638, from Cardinal de Richelieu introducing one Master Campy to the French Ambassador at Rome: a table of the Kings of Scotland, with some particulars, from Fergus "sone of Ferquhard," B.C. 330, down to Charles II—"a great, wise, merciefull and magnanimous P." who "succeeded his Father . . . and after 9 years exile, by a Rebellious prevalent party in Engl: was in y<sup>e</sup> year 1660, miraculously restored to y<sup>e</sup> Royall Throne of his Ancestors . . . whom God long preserve, and may y<sup>e</sup> lineall succession of that Royall Familie (under whose happie Government this Kingdō hath flourished these 2012 years in an uninterrupted Line) continue, by a just and Lineall Descent, while the Sunne and Moone Endure in y<sup>e</sup> Firmament, Dum coelum Stellas, dum vehet aequor aquas. Amen."

Then, in that same neat and diminutive hand, there is given "A Generall Exercise for Foot," with "The Exercise of y<sup>e</sup> Musquett," and Pyke, respectively, and "Evolutions."

"Musquetteers, take notice, to exercise your Musquets.

At this word of Command the Pykes are to order their Pykes.

Order your Musquets.  
Shoulder your Musquets.  
Joyn your right hand to your Musquets.  
Poyse your Musquets.  
Joyn your left hand to your Musquets.  
Take your Matches.  
Blow your Matches.  
Cocke your Matches.  
Try your Match to y<sup>e</sup> middle of your  
Pans.  
Guard your Pan with your two foremost  
fingers.  
Blow your Matches.  
At this Command the Pyke-men  
advance their Pykes.  
Open your Pans in presenting.  
At this the Pykes presents.  
Fyre."

And so forth. A leisurely business.

The entries in the second and less beautiful hand are "Ane Exact Acount of our Wholl Travels in Her Maiestys Regiment of Scotts Guairdse from Edenburgh" in May 1688 down to October 1691, when they were at the place spelt here Bergen op Zom. They go on Shippbord to Derford and Southwork and so to camp at Hunslo. In August they march north through Peterborg and

Linckhorn to Hull; and to and fro, sailing from Herwich in April of 1689 for the Low Countries. Following this itinerary is a series of coloured sketch maps of camps, positions, and actions fought during those years, showing "Marleboroughs quarter," and "Prince (Waldeck) quarter." (The thirteenth of these plans illustrates the positions taken up on either side of the river "Samber" with "Charleroy" on the regiment's right.)

Now I am as certain as circumstantial evidence and words of honour can make me of the ownership of this pocket-book from about the year 1800. The owner of that date had inherited the book from a Scottish family with which she, and I, were connected, the ramifications of which I had never explored, and of which an earlier member was alleged to have been in the Scotts Guairdse when that regiment was formed, and to have owned the book. This unfortified tradition had been maintained for over a century. It seemed probable enough, therefore, that one of the two writings in the pocket-book was by his hand. I don't defend myself: I tell the story for what it is worth as illuminating my point. I wrote an article, describing



this pocket-book in the *Connoisseur*\*, and, too readily believing all that I had been told, instead of merely the ascertainable part of the succession, I boldly put the name of the officer in question into print. And, privately, I got what I deserved. An eminent Scottish antiquary, who was interested by the article, wrote and asked if he could see the book. I showed it to him. His excitement and delight at finding there those early movements of the regiment, information regarding which, he assured me, had hitherto been entirely lost, was shared naturally enough by me; and the fact—it really seems to be a fact—does compensate me somewhat for the loss of an indisputable ancestor with a pretty knack for drawing battle plans, or for amusingly illustrating the Commandments. For my antiquary kindly but firmly put me in my place. No officer of that name had served in the Scots Guards during the period in question. A little humiliating, was it not? Traditions must indeed be probed.

Do you know the old gentleman, for whom, as a child, Mendelssohn composed his Cradle Song? So do I—several of them, and old ladies too.

\* *Connoisseur*, June, 1913.

A more flagrant type of case is easily reconstructed. You (for that pendulum already referred to has swung me towards pedantic conscientiousness: and I would not, therefore, be guilty of such an indiscretion) have a tobacco-box of Russian niello work,—silver, with black enamel filling up the etched design. Such boxes are attractive and quite common. You show this box to your friend, A, who has been in Russia and understands matters of this kind. “Ah,” he says, “the Czar was very fond of niello work. He always used to carry a case just like that.” You are delighted by this: you think about it and you pass it on to your friends. “The Czar,” you tell them, “had a case which was the exact replica of this.” After a time it comes to your recollection that the fellow who gave you your niello box had been used to attend the Russian Court. Well, then, obviously, (but not all at once) the box was once the property of the late Czar. You believe this. You pass the box on to your son, who knows you to be incapable of plain dishonesty. He accepts your word. Why should he not? And so the ball rolls. And provided it does not turn out that the Czar in question was a non-smoker, or only used cigars which

would not go into the box, the truth of such a story is difficult to disprove.

And, on the whole, is it often worth disproving? Why go out of your way to invite disillusionment?

You remember that Monsignor Perrelli, who had referred in his *Antiquities* to the thigh-bone of Saint Dodekanus, the patron of Nepenthe, on which island the relic was preserved?\* Then you will recall Father Capocchio who, "bald to coarseness, whenever he lacked occasion to be obscene," declared the bone to be not a femur, but a tibia, and that, not of a saint, but of a young cow or calf: and you will have in mind Mr Eames, to whom "it would have mattered little, *a priori*, whether the relic was a femur or a tibia, of cow or man. In this case, he liked to think it was the thigh-bone of a saint. He possessed an unusually strong dose of that Latin *pietas*, that reverence which consists in leaving things as they are, particularly when they have been described for the benefit of posterity, with the most engaging candour, by a man of Perrelli's calibre." The pros and cons of the doctrine implied, are not proposed as the subjects for anatomy

\* *South Wind*. By Norman Douglas. (Martin Secker) 1917-1927. Chapter III.

here: but that doctrine is delightfully dangerous, and much useful investigation might well be undertaken concerning those pros and cons.

ENDOWED, then, with a fair share of *pietas*, it is not necessarily the unique or rare specimens that the scrupulous collector most dearly loves, not the things of the highest monetary value, not the mahogany table made before mahogany came into general use, nor Prince Charlie's snuff-box, not the charger of Herodias, nor a First Folio, nor a drawing by Leonardo, nor a piece of porcelain made under the Han dynasty, nor a goblet by Verzelini, nor a holograph of James I, nor a steel chastity belt, engraved and gilt (with duplicate keys), nor a cabinet by Riesener nor any other extravagance: it will be something intimate, good of its kind, and swathed in association.

I invented a person in a story once, who in order not to lose touch with old memories, carried about with him on his extensive and often hazardous travels a little shrine, as he called it, of old possessions—a carved oak panel, a pewter plate, a brass candlestick, and a few books. That must have been my idea of a final choice fifteen years ago: but the severity of my elimination has since been mitigated. Were I now to be thrown out into the world with no more of



what I treasure than I could, inconveniently perhaps but still feasibly, carry on my back, I have ready in my mind a still modest list of things under which that back shall be bowed. Those two carved heads—I must have them: a couple of miniature portraits, one of an extraordinarily good-looking youth who fought at Seringapatam and made water-colour drawings; the other of an Irish planter from the West Indies, an ugly fellow with powdered hair and a white frilled stock. Both are lovely little paintings, the first with a dark background, the second with cerulean blue. Each has for me an inseverable interest. Then there is a ring set with a large flat transparent stone of olive green, exquisitely intagliated—a ring of utterly simple unostentatious beauty, a thing to gloat over in quiet rapture, as I hold it to the light and gaze upon the seated nymph so minutely sculptured there; or to play with, impressing it upon sealing wax, to see in concave those delicious limbs set in a hand-wrought oval of gold: then, a slim portfolio of original drawings, one of them by the subject of the miniature, and certain caricatures, including a couple by Dighton. . . . Out from its present frame shall come that Dutch line engraving

which describes the murder of Karel Stuard, Koning van Groot Brittanien. I have to think of the weight to be carried, and that is why I wobble in my decision about the Sheffield-plated candelabra and metals generally, but of what added burden is a piece of paper five inches by seven? Apart from its subject, which fills me with pity and hurts me with rage, the drawing is for itself enjoyable: the way in which the group of figures and the adjacent buildings of Whitehall are designed and fill the allotted space gives pleasure before you come to consider the component parts or what they represent. Juxon's hand points upwards, diagonally; the King's downwards, the first and second fingers spread, the others crooked, the arms of the two figures are parallel and this little fact lends balance to the whole drawing.

And there will have to be a mezzotint portrait or two.

A few books satisfied the vagabondage of that imaginary fellow of years ago; well, when I set out with my treasures in a rucksack, the indispensable and irreducible minimum of my books I shall push before me on a barrow. For of all the things that I collect—but it is not necessary to labour the point. The books about

collecting alone are numerous and very heavy, and in them I have excellent photographs and drawings of all the most delectable objects of art and *virtù*, which in no circumstances of wealth, however preposterous, could I ever possess. Even the photographs of pleasant things offer me a little satisfaction. And there are many books given to me and inscribed by their authors; and beautifully bound old books; and a number of cheap editions which, in a strong light and with spectacles I can at least read. Certainly, I shall have to get a barrow for the books—or else a lorry.

Yes: well—I should prefer not to be thrown out into the world with my rucksack and my memories, however heavy, however delightful they, respectively, may be. I have heard, and jocularly repeated, that the man without any possessions is the happiest; and so, in some far millennium, he would be: but for anyone bred and brought up in the comfortable security of the 19th century, and who has all his life possessed so much as a chromo-lithograph of Queen Victoria that he could call his own, will not really be contented with the change, be it gradual or sudden. At all events, I do not want to put myself to the test. I have deliberately chosen the

picture rather than the spade for my man, just as I picked out the ring and the carved heads for myself, as typifying my requirement more actually than a mahogany bureau, or a good old chair. For in extreme plight I would far rather sit hard and sleep rough than, in smug ease, be denied those "useless" extras which are art and life. Is that vanity? It is a personal vanity, though: something not to show to other people—that would be unwise—but to satisfy myself, something not only to remind me that I was once a civilized person, who lay back in an arm-chair with one knee crooked over the other and read a book by a warm fire, but to perpetuate the living delight I have always known in certain chattels.

Short of some catastrophe, we often find it hard to realize how exceedingly important the ornamental, the largely "useless" parts of our common surroundings are. As already suggested, the more ordinary use we give to good things, the better for us and, except in the case of breakables, the better for them. But it is the things that we look at and touch for no practical ends with which, for one reason or another, we can least happily dispense.

